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Former CIA agent calls agency action arm of imperial America

By Tim Cuprisin
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Ralph McGehee spent much of his hour-long talk Thursday night recounting the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

His lecture was part of Central America Information Week.

That was McGehee's point.

The 25-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency drew parallels between his agency's activity in the early stages of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and the current stage of activity in Central America.

"Espionage, being called the second oldest profession, is a lot like the oldest profession. There ain't much new," said McGehee, who left the CIA in 1977.

He has since written a book about his experience in Japan, Thailand and Vietnam. At one

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point, he was the adviser to the head of the South Vietnamese equivalent of the FBI.

McGehee's central theme is that the CIA is actually the secret action arm of the president's foreign policy, rather than an information-gathering network of secret agents.

"It's the action arm of imperial America. It's going around the world trying to overthrow the things we're supposed to uphold," he said.

"We have an elitist government. The agency is an arm of the elite."

At the start of his talk to more than 100 persons at the Union Congregational Church, 716 S. Madison St., he warned the audience he wouldn't be cheering them up.

"What I'll be saying is pretty much of a downer," McGehee said. "But don't be put down by what I say."

McGehee said that events like the statewide Central America Information Week — coordinated locally by Dave Steffenson of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Ecumenical Center — are pointing out the dangers of American military involvement in Central America.

That involvement is made possible by the still-dominant theme of the threat of world communism, he said.

"You say the communists are coming and that allows you under that smokescreen to do what you want to do," he said.

He cited the U.S. invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983, charging that the CIA and the government created the illusion that U.S. medical students were endangered by the political situation on the island.

"The only danger they were in was when American troops came in," he said.

McGehee warned of a domestic side-effect to the CIA's attempts to topple governments deemed unfriendly to U.S. interests.

"You cannot do all these things abroad without doing the same things here. That is my great fear," he said.

However, America's defeat in Vietnam may have actually been a positive development, in McGehee's estimation.

"The Vietnamese defeat of empire America was probably the beginning of the crumbling of this," he said.